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RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0062  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000620

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL/NESCA, NEA/PI  
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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL ECON SCUL SENV SOCI SMIG SY TU

SUBJECT: SIX MONTH CHECK-UP: KURDS AILING BUT POLITICALLY  
MOTIVATED

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 00203  
1B. 08 DAMASCUS 00788  
1C. DAMASCUS 00343  
1D. DAMASCUS 00432

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Drought, unemployment, economic & cultural discrimination, political repression, arbitrary arrest, unexplainable deaths, and statelessness contributed to a miserable first six months of the Kurdish New Year (Nowruz) in Syria -- making this year, so far, very much like last year. The one notable difference was that SARG forces did not kill any Kurds during Nowruz celebrations, as they did in 2008 (ref A). In a lengthy August 24 conversation with Luqman Osso (strictly protect), a member of the Kurdish Azadi Party's political leadership, we learned these economic and political pressures have motivated Kurdish leaders across the political spectrum to pool their energies into the formation of a single Kurdish council that would speak with one voice, both to the regime and to the international community. Osso reported the council's formation was moving quickly as it was widely perceived Kurds must take some action to alleviate the current conditions under which they suffer. End Summary.

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Kurds Seek Political Unity  
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¶2. (C) Luqman Osso, a member of the Kurdish Azadi Party's political leadership, explained on August 24 how nine Kurdish political parties had begun a series of meetings aimed at forming a unified political council. The idea, he said, was to create a single, unified voice to speak on Kurdish issues. The formation of such a council had been discussed informally as far back as 2007, but in May, the parties began cooperating with a greater sense of urgency. Osso emphasized the parties had moved forward vigorously and he hoped the council would officially establish itself by the end of 2009.

¶3. (C) Osso claimed the first tasks of a political council would be (1) to shape a Kurdish message on the current political and economic situation for international consumption; (2) to do economic studies on the al-Jazeera region to illustrate the Kurds' plight; (3) to seek to engage

domestic and international interlocutors in aid projects for the al-Jazeera region; (4) to push back against ongoing SARG economic discrimination against Kurds, especially Decree 49 (ref B); and (5) to continue planning demonstrations and other political advocacy projects.

**¶4. (C)** One of the stumbling blocks slowing the formation of the political council, Osso elaborated, was that the Yeketi, Azadi, and Future Movement parties wished to preserve individual parties' rights to independent action, which they did not believe contradicted the principle of speaking with a single voice. The second problem was that the Kurdish Progressive Democratic Party in Syria (backbone of the Kurdish Democratic Alliance), led by Hamid Darwish, and the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (an offshoot of the Yeketi Party), led by Ismael Omar, refused to join the "council of nine" unless everyone agreed to form concomitantly a separate "national council" of Kurdish citizens who would support and advise the political council in a parliamentary-type manner. Osso argued the political council should first be convened, after which it could focus on how to develop an attendant national council. He added the "council of nine" would form their political council with or without the participation of Darwish's and Omar's parties.

**¶5. (C)** The political parties involved in the "council of nine" are: (1) the Democratic Party branch led by Hakim Abdul Bashar and (2) the Democratic Party branch led by Nasradeen Ibrahim; (3) the Democratic National Party led by Taher Sfouka; (4) the Equality Party (al-Musawat) led by Aziz Dawud; (5) the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party led by Jamal Sheikh Mahmud; (6) the Azadi Party, led by Khaer Dimarat; (7) the Yeketi Party, led by Fuad Aliko; (8) the Future Movement Party, led by Meshaal Tammo (currently in prison, ref C); and (9) the Leftist Kurdish Party, a Marxist party led by Hamad Musa.

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#### Political Plight

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**¶6. (C)** Part of the "council of nine's" sense of urgency stemmed from the tremendous pressure brought to bear, both politically and economically, against Kurds in the al-Jazeera region in the last few years, Osso said. Since March 2004, the Kurdish situation had steadily degenerated to the point where immediate action was necessary.

**¶7. (U)** In the weeks before and after the celebration of the 2009 Kurdish New Year (Nowruz), SARG security elements harassed, arrested, and in some cases convicted many of the hundreds of Kurds who participated in political and cultural events throughout the month of March. In addition to the March 21 Nowruz celebrations, which resulted in a wave of arrests across the Aleppo and Hasaka provinces, many Kurds were detained for public commemorations of the March 12, 2004, "Kurdish Uprising," expressions of Kurdish culture through music and literature, and for publishing political material in Kurdish language newspapers. (Note: Three members of the Azadi Party are currently on trial for publishing political commentary in an illegal Kurdish language newspaper.)

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#### Mysterious "Suicides"

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**¶8. (C)** Coupled with the SARG's crackdown has been a spate of inexplicable "suicides" by young Kurds completing their obligatory military service. Since 2004, between 18 and 24 Kurdish youth have killed themselves under what Kurdish contacts and human rights organizations insisted were mysterious circumstances. According to a May 2009 International War and Peace Reporting article, in 2008 eight Kurds died in this manner. Through additional reports and contact meetings, Post has counted eight Kurds who had already died this year under similar circumstances.

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The Drought  
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¶9. (C) Severe drought throughout the country, especially in the al-Jazeera region, has devastated the agricultural sector and increased the already heavy pattern of outmigration from the region toward cities in the country's western corridor -- mainly, Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia (ref D). Osso argued SARG policy toward the region in general, but Kurds in particular, had exacerbated the problem. Only the increased Kurdish population in urban centers, and the potential threat its discontent might pose, he asserted, had produced enough concern to compel the SARG to address the problem.

¶10. (C) Osso cited the refusal of the SARG to issue 1,900 new well-digging permits over the last ten years in and around the city of Ra's al-Ayn, which abuts Syria's border with Turkey, as evidence the SARG had deliberately sought to disenfranchise Kurds in the region. In the area affected, Osso claimed, over 100,000 Kurds had once lived. Without water, he said, many of them eventually migrated from the region. The situation now, he continued, was even worse. "Syria should be like Turkey," Osso complained, noting how the Turkish government granted Turkish Kurds living just across the border well-digging permits and small subsidies. These actions allowed Kurds to remain on their land, Osso argued, and the same should be done for Syrian Kurds.

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Osso's Profile  
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¶11. (C) Luqman Osso is a man without a nation despite having been born in Qamishli. As one of the 150,000 to 300,000 stateless Kurds living in Syria, he lacks national identification papers; he is unable to work legally without yearly requesting a foreigner's work permit; his marriage (to a Russian) remains unregistered; his three children were refused citizenship and registered as "foreigners" as well.

¶12. (C) The crippling economic strain on Syria in the 1980s was particularly acute in al-Jazeera, so in 1985, Osso left Qamishli at the age of 24 for Damascus in search of work. In 1991, he gained employment with a commercial company -- the same one he works for today -- that agreed to pay him under the table and never pressed him to apply for a work permit. Only once, in 1997, did security agents force him to apply. Since then, he remarked wryly, "when the agents come by the office to ask if there are any foreigners working here, I say, 'no.'"

¶13. (C) Comment: An organized council of Kurdish parties able to speak with one voice might seriously shift the Arab-Kurdish political landscape in Syria. The Kurds are the only group in Syria who have time and again proven they can mobilize the street and stage large-scale demonstrations, even when the threat of violent reprisal was guaranteed. Two obstacles, however, will continue to plague efforts to galvanize a formal political council. First, Kurdish parties face persistent divisions based on personality and ideological differences. Second, even if such a council managed to form, its ability to withstand SARG countermeasures, given the determination with which the government attacks opposition figures, would be limited at best. End Comment.

HUNTER